

# Ideology and practice: Sweden, Viktor Balck and the Le Havre Olympic Congress in 1897



## 1. Introduction

In the second volume of his posthumously (1929, 1931) published memoirs Viktor Balck (1844-1928) has included one small section dealing with Olympic congresses. Only two congresses are mentioned, the one in Le Havre (1897) and a later one in Paris (1914). Most attention is paid to the first one mentioned. Significantly enough, however, the old Balck has nothing to say about the meaning of the congresses in the development of the Olympic movement. Instead, he mentions some personal episodes.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Le Havre, Balck has placed Felix Faure, the president of France in 1897, in the middle of his presentation. Faure is mentioned as Balck's old friend (he appears on other pages in the memoirs); their acquaintance obviously went back to 1880, where they met at a feast for gymnasts and swimmers in Brussels. Balck proudly tells that Faure invited him to take part in a dinner for the Canadian prime minister during the congress. Most space in the memoirs is dedicated to some incidents during the dinner conversation.<sup>2</sup>

So far Balck only demonstrates his social orientation towards the upper classes, his endeavour to make himself acknowledged, in Sweden and sports, in the highest strata of society. But he also, as briefly as possible, mentions the Dominican monk Père Didon, whose lecture on sport and „L'esprit de combativité“ had stayed in Balck's memory for decades.<sup>3</sup> This leads us over to the main topic: significant impulses, ideological and practical, to and from Balck during the Le Havre congress.

By way of introduction, the following remarks should be made.

1. The congress will be seen from an exclusively Swedish point of view. To put it another way: no attempt will be made to integrate possible Swedish impulses with the official proceedings of the congress and its final decisions. By presenting the Swedish version, based on „national“ sources, it is my hope to give a contribution

1 Cf. Viktor Balcks Minnen, II, Mannaåren. 1931, 168-72.

2 Cf. Ibid. 39, 42, 54, 58, 88, 168-70.

3 Cf. Ibid. 170.

to a synthetic overall picture of the whole congress. This picture can only be drawn by combining all national and other aspects with what really happened during the congress.

2. It is not unjustified to speak about a Swedish delegation including at least three persons. Apart from Balck, two Swedes living in Paris, more or less frequently, took part in the congress. The industrialist Thorsten Nordenfelt belonged to Balck's adherents for many years, acting as one of his most generous sponsors. Fredrik Bergh was one of many Swedish gymnasts who, examined from the Royal Gymnastic Central Institute in Stockholm, lived abroad on medical or pedagogical gymnastics.<sup>4</sup>

However, Balck seems to be the only person formally nominated from a leading Swedish sports organization to represent Sweden. He was secretary general of Sveriges centralförening för idrottens främjande (The Swedish Central Association for the Promotion of Sport), which had been founded in May 1897. In fact, the question of representation or not at the Le Havre congress became the greatest question of the association during the first months of its existence, except for internal matters concerning membership, finance etc.

Balck presented the question of representation in a persuasive way. Three main arguments can be distinguished. Firstly (and perhaps most important) he pointed out that Stockholm had been mentioned in Athens in 1896 as a good candidate for the Olympic Games in 1904; a decision should be made in Le Havre. Secondly, other important decisions could be expected. Thirdly, IOC president Coubertin had sent letters (not found in Swedish archives) urgently asking for a large Swedish participation.

The discussion within the Association focused on the week's financial situation, since the organisation was so recently founded. In particular, Crown Prince Gustaf (the president of the association) and others maintained that the question of Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1904 was raised too early because of this. The discussion ended in a positive way insofar as it was decided that the association should be represented by one person.<sup>5</sup>

3. At this time Balck was by far the leading personality within the Swedish sports movement. He combined a position as a teacher at the Royal Central Institute of Gymnastics in Stockholm with a great number of engagements in local clubs in the same capital, mostly as the president. On the national level he was a leading figure in various organisations as well. In particular, he took a dominating position as far as international relations are concerned. Moreover, it would not be too much to maintain that he was number one in the Nordic countries as an international sports leader before World War I.<sup>6</sup> One indication is the fact that he was formally asked to represent the leading Danish sports federation at the Le Havre Congress.<sup>7</sup>
4. The Swedish participation at the congress has not been dealt with in scholarly literature before this presentation. The source material is satisfactory. Apart from the above mentioned memoirs, there is a file in Balck's archives exclusively dedicated to the Swedish participation in the congress. Here one can find printed information sent out before the congress, invitation cards to president Faure's dinner and some handwritten manuscripts to oral interventions made by Balck during congress discussions.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the congress was mentioned in the leading Swedish sports paper, *Tidning för idrott* (Journal for Sports).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Balck wrote two extensive articles in a daily paper.<sup>10</sup> His report to the Swedish Central Association (see above) is included in the minutes (record book).<sup>11</sup> Altogether, this gives favourable conditions for presenting the congress from a national point of view.

4 Sveriges centralförening för idrottens främjande, minutes (record book) 13/11 1897, Swedish National Archives, Stockholm.

5 Cf. *ibid.* 7/5, 24/5, 26/6, 13/11 1897.

6 Cf. Sten Drakenberg: Viktor Balck. In: *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, Vol. 2, 1920, pp. 611-616. Jan Lindroth: *Idrottens väg till folkrörelse*. (Studia Historica Upsaliensia 60), 1974.

7 Cf. Letter from Danmarks idraetsforbund to Balck 19/7 1897 (file concerning the congress in Le Havre, Balck's archives, JIIa:17, Swedish National Archives, Stockholm).

8 Cf. *ibid.*

9 Cf. *Tidning för idrott*. 22/4, 26/8 1897.

10 Cf. *Stockholms Dagblad*. 22-23/8 1897.

11 Cf. footnote 4-5.

5. Congress participation can give results on various fields, for instance, personal contacts, ideological impulses, practical decisions, etc. Here two alternatives will be put in the forefront: ideology and practice (I have deliberately chosen the term „ideology“, although „theory“ could have been more natural as an antithesis to practice.) To what extent did Balck engage himself (and thereby the Swedish sports movement) in ideological and practical matters during the Le Havre congress? Where did he give and where did he receive impulses?

## 2. Ideology

Ideology within the field of sports is here defined as „*ideas and arguments meant to explain the importance of sports from an individual and societal perspective*“.<sup>12</sup> During the 1890s Balck developed a sports ideology, which mainly remained the same for the rest of his life. It focused on patriotic and character building values of sports, whereas the physiological values were not very much emphasised. To a great deal, his inspiration came from England and he was, at least since the 1880s, an ardent Anglophile, attaching great importance to sport when explaining the prosperity of England and the British empire. The years around the turn of the century he started to travel around his country, giving propaganda speeches to the benefit of the sports movement.<sup>13</sup> Which ideological impulses did he receive in Le Havre, if any, and what did he give?

From Balck's reports<sup>14</sup> it is perfectly clear that he was highly inspired by the congress in the ideological field. In fact, it is difficult to point out any other single event from which he has received more inspiration during his whole life time. What fascinated him was obviously not the Olympic ideology (Olympism) but general sports ideology. It was not the Olympic ideas and ideals of Coubertin that had made the greatest impression on him, but two other speakers, who appeared on the stage: Pierre Gabriel Bonvalot and Père Didon. They both focused Balck's favourite theme: sports, patriotism and character building.

Bonvalot was a French explorer, who started his work in the central parts of Asia around 1880. He became the first European to reach India via Turkestan. In 1889 he went to Tonkin via Tibet, receiving great marks of honour and distinction when returning home. Obviously, he was a precursor of the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, who started his expeditions in the same areas a few years later.

Balck was full of admiration for Bonvalot's speech because of its eloquence and contents. It dealt with the influence of physical exercises and efforts. Simple, hardening ways of life were important according to Balck's summary of Bonvalot's ideology. Physical exercises strengthened a people in the struggle for life. Bonvalot criticised French education for being too soft, pointing out the English educational system as a good example. He emphasised, completely in accordance with Balck's own ideas, educational goals like personal development, power of resistance, will, and energy. Pain was more developing than pleasure. In total, it was a question of „endurance du caractère“, which could not be achieved by way of books.

Balck paid still more attention to the already mentioned Père Didon. In this case, Balck - himself a good speaker with a military voice of high decibel capacity - admired both the eloquence and the intellectual contents of the speech. Obviously, Didon was a charismatic person with a personal charm far beyond the average level. Balck

<sup>12</sup> Lars Gunnarsson/Jan Lindroth: Att studera idrottsideologi - ett diskussionsinlägg. In: Idrott, historia och samhälle, 1984, pp. 56-65.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lindroth (1974). Henrik Sandberg: Från Olympia till Valhalla. 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Here and in general see the following reports (partly identical):  
- Stockholms Dagblad. 22-23/8 1897.  
- Tidning för idrott. 26/8 1897.  
- Minutes (footnote 4) 13/11 1897.

commented: *Jag tror mig ej tillförne ha hört hans like i vältalighet*<sup>15</sup> (I don't think I have ever heard his equal in eloquence).

According to Balck, Didon talked about physical and intellectual energy, stressing the interrelation between the two. In particular, Didon dealt with the fighting spirit, arguing that the strong persons are the good ones, the weak being mean and thereby dangerous. Sports were meant to develop a feeling of honour and chivalry. Regular physical exercises provoked morality, courage, energy and patience.

Balck also noticed and reported about Didon's division of sports enemies into three categories of persons: the frightened, the passive and the intellectuals. No doubt, Balck had met all these types in his own country and could completely agree with the French speaker. Moreover, what must have suited Balck, himself a military officer, extremely well is Didon's interpretation of „l'esprit de combativité“, also an ingredient in Bonvalet's ideology.

In his speeches in Sweden after the Le Havre Congress Balck included ideas and experiences of Bonvalot and Didon, explicitly referring to the two Frenchmen. This conclusion can be drawn from a study of his manuscripts, which are preserved.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the ideological impulses from Le Havre reached all those who listened to Balck during his propaganda tours in Sweden. He also wrote about the ideas of Bonvalot and Didon in Swedish daily press.<sup>17</sup>

Did Balck, in turn, give ideological impulses to the congress? It is not possible, according to source material of Swedish provenance, to give a final answer. Obviously, Balck presented his (the Swedish) standpoints about the relation between gymnastics, play and sports.<sup>18</sup> This frequently discussed theme, however, mainly goes side by side with the definition of sports ideology presented above. He also seems to have made some interventions concerning gymnastics teacher education and the Royal Central Institute of Gymnastics in Stockholm. These contributions do not fit together with sports ideology. The impulses from Balck to the congress are to be found in another field.

### 3. Practice

By far the most important contribution from the side of Balck were thirteen points (or items) which Balck presented to the congress.<sup>19</sup> He suggested that they should all be considered by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Some of them can be characterized as recommendations, others as open questions. They are, slightly condensed, as follows:

1. Official notification of Olympic Games in Paris in 1900 as soon as possible, including money granted by municipality and state.
2. These games should take place at the end of May or the beginning of June.
3. Establishing certain basic exercises to appear in all games such as athletics, pentathlon, group gymnastics.
4. Organising country should be free to include other exercises.
5. The question whether one should make a statement against certain exercises as being inappropriate for Olympic Games.
6. Detailed descriptions of all exercises on the program including equipment.
7. In case of gymnastic competitions it should always be compulsory to have group competitions according to a complete and all round program, not individualistic competitions in particular exercises, which create one-sidedness.

15 Stockholms Dagblad. 23/8 1897.

16 Cf. Manuscript 2, 8-10, in Balck's archives, Vol 2, Swedish National Archives, Stockholm.

17 Cf. Stockholms Dagblad. 23/8 1897.

18 A manuscript of this presentation is included in the Le Havre file (see footnote 7).

19 Tidning för idrott 26/8 1897. Minutes (footnote 4) 13/11 1897.

8. Recommendation to pentathlon according to recent rules implying that all participants must compete in all five exercises.
9. An expansion of the IOC by two members from every country, representing a certain corporation or association for sports or gymnastics. These members should preferably be elected in their own country.
10. Not more than 8-10 days for Olympic Games.
11. Detailed programs to the sport associations from all participating countries being distributed at least one year in advance.
12. Shall the place for the next Olympic Games (after Paris) be decided before 1900?
13. A new congress before the Olympic Games in Paris?

Balck afterwards reported that all points were in principle approved of for further treatment within the IOC. As to number 5, the opinion seemed to be in favour of a liberal policy. Number 12 and 13 were answered positively. Which interests and values can be deduced from the above 13 points or questions?

A first observation is that Balck wanted to regulate the Olympic Games, in particular the sports program, in order to stabilise them for the future. A lot of practical questions are put forward. An ambition to go from sounds to things can be traced behind or between the lines. The goal was to safeguard the continuation of the games by way of decisions in good time concerning a lot of practical issues.

This interpretation finds a significant support in Balck's own words just after the congress. Then, he characterised the contribution of the Swedish delegation as follows:

*„Vi svenskar ha under kongressen liksom framtvingat en del besluts fattande särskilt rörande det internationella samarbetet. Man visade nämligen en tendens att huvudsakligast hålla vackra för övrigt mycket värdefulla tal. Det hade annars blivit allt /för/ mycket demonstrationer och för litet arbetsresultat.“*<sup>20</sup> („During the congress we Swedes have, so to speak, forced the way for some decisions especially concerning the international cooperation. A tendency was namely prevailing mostly to give beautiful and, besides, very valuable speeches. Otherwise, there would have been too many demonstrations and too little working results.“)

Another observation leads over to the gymnastic field. At least three points (3, 7-8) are emanating from a set of values significant of the Ling or Swedish gymnastics. Much could be said about this topic; Balck took a delicate position between orthodox Lingianism, German gymnastics (Turnen) and competitive sports etc. Here it is enough to state that he tried to satisfy basic Lingianist values in terms of group exercises, avoiding individualistic competitions and physiological one-sidedness. In the Olympics to come, the gymnastic question caused many fundamental problems - not least to the Swedish representation.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The Swedish participation in the Olympic Congress in Le Havre in 1897 has been analysed from two aspects, one ideological and the other practical. Moreover, in both cases it has been asked whether the Swedish delegation (in reality Viktor Balck) was a donor or a receiver of impulses. The results seem to be persuasive. On the ideological level Balck received important impulses, in particular by the speeches of Père Didon and Pierre Bonvalot. His (the Swedish) contribution took place on the practical level, where he put forward a great number of questions and suggestions in order to safeguard Olympic Games in the future and regulate their program in detail.

At least three reasons for this attitude can be distinguished. The first one has to do with Balck's interest in arranging the third Olympics in Stockholm in 1904; then it was natural to take a practical view on the Olympic

<sup>20</sup> Stockholms Dagblad. 23/8 1897.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Lindroth (1974), pp. 245-247.

matters. The second reason is linked with the general tendency within the early Swedish sport movement - dominated as it was by military officers, businessmen and industrialists - to concentrate on practical work at the cost of ideology and theoretical reflection. Thirdly, Balck did not adopt much of the specific Olympic ideology (Olympism); to him (quite different from Coubertin) the Olympics essentially meant an arena in which patriotic feelings and efforts could be realised.

The early Olympic movement in Sweden has not been studied systematically on a scholarly level. Probably, the course of events during the Le Havre Congress are significant. Olympic ideology was far behind practical questions, the main goal being nationalistic. The same tendency is likely to be found in other countries as well. This makes the achievements of Coubertin all the more remarkable.

## Résumé

### **Idéologie et expérience: Suède, Viktor Balck et le Congrès olympique du Havre en 1897**

L'auteur analyse la participation suédoise au Congrès olympique du Havre en 1897 sous un angle idéologique et pratique. Comme jusqu'à maintenant il n'existe aucune étude scientifique sur les débuts du mouvement olympique en Suède, les éléments, lors de ce Congrès, sont considérés comme étant capitaux.

L'auteur se demande si le congrès du Havre aurait donné à Viktor Balck, principal représentant de la délégation suédoise, de nouvelles idées ou si au contraire celui-ci aurait influencé le Congrès. Au point de vue idéologique, deux personnages ont particulièrement influencé Balck: Le Père Didon et Pierre Gabriel Bonvalot.

Pour sa part, l'exposé de Balck est en grande partie à classer dans le domaine de la pratique. En effet, il pose des questions et fait des propositions ayant pour but de garantir la réalisation des J.O. ainsi que d'en régler en détail le programme.

Quels sont les motifs sur lesquels est fondée l'opinion pratique de Balck? Il y en a trois.

Le premier, c'est l'intérêt qu'il porte à organiser les Jeux de 1904 à Stockholm. Le deuxième, c'est la tendance générale d'orientation pratique dans les débuts du mouvement sportif suédois. Le troisième, c'est son attitude envers l'idéologie olympique qui cédait le pas à ses points de vue pratiques, étant donné la vision national-socialiste qu'il avait des J.O.

A la fin l'auteur constate que Balck n'était pas le seul en Suède, mais aussi d'en d'autres pays, à penser de la sorte. Ceci rendit d'autant plus remarquable les efforts fournis par Coubertin.